

# RSA

## Look Out...Look In

Moukhtar Kocache



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## Look Out...Look In

I write this from Jerusalem, unable to return to Cairo, my base for the last seven years. There, young people have creatively – and with great heart – chosen to be active participants in shaping their future, revealing in the process, global imminent change, shifting social realities and the decline of traditional moral, political and economic Western hegemonic stability.

The moment sheds light for me on the increased connectedness of our world and the opportunity to reflect on how the challenges facing the arts, the urgency of our current situation, has deeper causes than recent cuts to public funding.

Over the last 30 years the position of arts in society has been fundamentally weakened in several key ways. A retreat of political philosophy from social policy debates has decoupled the arts from ideas of social progress. Ill-conceived policy and strategy priorities have boxed arts institutions into a corner, stripping them of a vocabulary that might enable escape. Capacity building, reform of leadership development and broader institutional practices have left the arts sector out of kilter with an increasingly interdisciplinary, polymathic and connected world. As institutions we are not as central to the ecologies of creativity and imagination as we might be.

On both sides of the Atlantic and beyond, we need a renewed sense of energy and purpose: a new social contract for the arts. We are at a turning point; for it to be a positive one, we need to examine the deeper currents that have brought us here. This short essay sets out a vision to reposition the arts in society and, by interrogating and unpacking the forces behind our current predicament, suggests where we need to look to in starting to build it.

### *A New Social Contract for the Arts*

The political and social gains of the twentieth century are indebted to a model of the social democratic liberal state, which sets policies to a large extent according to notions of justice, equity and morality. Since the 1970s however, an admiration of ‘free enterprise’, introduced notions of efficiency, profit and growth as pillars of contemporary democracies. Economic rationalisations restricted our evaluations of new ideas and policies to notions of profit and loss. Slowly, private sector ethics and standards began to shape public programs, adding ambiguity to our relationship to the state.

The recent financial crash provides us with an opportunity to question and negotiate our collective relationship with this trend given that our states – repositories of our collective funds – stepped in to save corporate financial institutions and merged the realms of the private and the public in a manner that is unprecedented in modern democratic history.

The rhetoric during times of economic difficulty is that we must be responsible and accept tough decisions. Clearly there is truth and reason in this attitude. However, it is also true that societies make decisions about priorities and value judgments over what and how an area of public life should be funded. In a climate of great inequities of wealth and opportunities, and increased social and political insecurity, how do we engage in constructive criticism and sustained involvement? How can we bring moral and ethical parameters (without the tedious and myopic left-right divide) back to our social policy debates?

The arts, with their ability to create spheres of intellectual and radical reflection on contemporary life and our shared experience, are poised to be vital here. Our sector can be central in inspiring citizens into participation and bringing them away from alienation and apathy. We can lead our communities into a process of reflection and debate around difficult and sensitive dialogues to imagine and redesign their priorities.

I imagine our sector rebuilding its alliances with social movements to regain its historic place at the forefront of ideological and social mobilisation. Renewing our ‘contract’ with the rest of

society, and establishing partnerships with the broader civil society sector, seems to me a moral imperative. But it is also of strategic importance if we are to advance public policies, share costs, expand opportunities, gain a seat at diverse forums, attract and cross-pollinate populations and – critically – establish broader support for our work. This renewal demands three shifts in how things are done both inside and outside the arts world.

### *Shift 1: Self-Knowledge for Better Policy*

For three decades, the standards, values and language of neo-liberal economics slowly shaped the development of social policies, including those impacting on the arts. Financial crisis aside, we have been defensively and frantically engaged in a struggle to convince policymakers of certain instrumental benefits (of which there are many) while ignoring, or failing to make the case for the profound nature and subject of the arts.

Increased adoption of neo-liberal standards of output and efficiency by public funding agencies and foundations, forced our sector into increasingly technocratic, evidence-based and target-driven arguments. Despite the many important findings and expanded field of play this has offered us, these approaches – designed to convince decision makers – remained alien to the sector and have not fully yielded the long-term political legitimacy we had hoped for. The arts have continued to be devalued, marginalised and disposed of during times of uncertainty. It is increasingly believed that, even when we do see a return to economic prosperity, we may not see a proportional increase in support for the arts. This points to a fundamental flaw or incompleteness in the shaky strategies, lexicon and arguments that the arts sector have so far presented.

The spectrum of ‘instrumental’ arguments that have been researched and articulated over the last few decades serve to provide a wider understanding of our sector’s ecology and its impact on our world and societies. The last thing we should do is to start from scratch, regardless of how reductive and unsatisfactory some of our proposed models appear to be. Arguments that have advanced the economic impact, urban regeneration role, civic function and human developmental character of the arts have unleashed significant resources, expanded knowledge, deepened partnerships and unearthed interdisciplinary approaches. These have helped to enrich our community and expanded our scope of intervention.

The flip side however, is that we have in the process alienated segments of our community. We have advocated benefits that we either did not fully understand or believe in, and most importantly, we neglected – perhaps fearing accusations of elitism and sogginess – the experiential, innate, emotional and intellectual transformative role of the arts. We now need strategies, language and knowledge sharing communities that can help us re-learn who we are.

Looking to the creation of international think tanks and interdisciplinary research initiatives that would compile diverse global case studies and improve our data collection capacities could be one such approach. New communities of knowledge sharing and training would help to aggregate our findings and build more holistic arguments that acknowledge, respect and defend the spectrum of qualities, values and benefits of culture and art<sup>1</sup>. The arts sector also needs to renegotiate its place within the creative industries paradigm, finding a place that feels more comfortable, genuine and participatory. Added confidence and ownership of new advocacy tools would help us better interface with the marketplace and the realm of commerce.

### *Shift 2. Leaders and Practice*

The second shift needed is for the arts community to take an honest and critical look at itself, its attitudes and institutions. We need to find the wisdom and bravery for non-conventional and

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<sup>1</sup> See for example; Bolton M. Cooper C. *Capital Matters*. MMM 2010; Holden, J. *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy*. Demos 2006; Bakhshi, H. *Beauty Value Beyond Measure?* CABE 2010.

alternative reform that help to improve our impact and broader reach, while increasing institutional and artistic independence and stability. For this we will need new leaders and practice.

On a basic level, this means demystifying our arts institutions, rendering them more transparent and accessible; even, perhaps, re-imagining the use of our spaces and facilities. Much work remains to be done in improving the accountability and governance of many arts institutions. Too often our sector has a complex relationship and value-laden attribution to wealth and money that is singularly bourgeois and is sustained by low self-confidence and historic traditions of patronage. Our leadership and the culture of arts organisations need to re-negotiate this dynamic: this includes reconceiving asking for funds as the act of giving to the arts as an invitation for participation rather than as an act of charity.

An attitudinal shift is also in order. Too much time, energy and resources are squandered on insular and immature dynamics. Abundant cynicism and posturing radicalism inhibit many avant-garde institutions in actually developing a sustained and legitimate alternative culture. False opposites and imagined polarities are unnecessarily sustained between what is considered to be avant-garde versus mainstream: art for development versus art for art's sake; curatorial and intellectual versus outreach and public education; and high art versus popular culture.

I have great respect for formal and academic but also experimental curatorial work. However, I am skeptical of excessive rewarding of the 'next great idea' or individualistic programmatic and curatorial projects at our institutions: we need curatorial strategies and need-based programming that further organisations' missions and mutually benefit the arts, the public and excellence.

Innovative leadership development and professional education programs are crucial to producing a well-trained and multi-skilled cadre. Our current educational systems produce art managers who are, mostly, unfamiliar with art history and the processes of artists and curators. The same institutions produce art historians, programmers and curators who are not fully, if at all, trained to think about education, public programs, community engagement or funding.

Developing cultural leaders who – regardless of the positions they will occupy in our institutions and in the arts ecology – are versed in art history, making processes, political philosophy, contemporary theory, management and policy, would allow us to develop internal structures and operations that leave us better able to lead and defend our work in conversations with stakeholders and decision makers. We may have to imagine, no matter how difficult it may feel, a future where our institutions do not follow modernist structures: where curators, educators, technologists, development and communication experts work together in groups that break institutional silos. This would lead to more comprehensive and complex arts programs that are better able to advance our missions and priorities.

### *Shift 3: A Cosmology of New Resource Models*

The third shift we need to see concerns how we raise money. The development of philanthropy, whether in the form of individual giving and private, public and corporate foundations, is essential in diversifying the sources and types of resources available to the arts and culture sector.

A well-developed and diverse philanthropic sector, aside from adding resources to the table, provides increased specificity and breadth in the types of possible programs and initiatives that can be undertaken. Crucially, it relieves the public sector, not by filling overall funding gaps, but rather by helping streamline and better articulate public funding priorities and strategies. Private capital can give public funding a more acute sense of where it is really needed. New sources of funding expand the breadth of possible donor relationships to include patrons, the state, corporations, social justice foundations, investors and the public.

A culture of giving however takes decades and generations to develop and stems from historical ideological, political, philosophical and administrative contexts and conditions. In these times of uncertainty it is essential that we look outwards: beyond the next funding cycle and our comfort levels in searching for opportunities globally and within the wider field of creative sector.

All over the world in different circumstances, often without public funding or generous

private philanthropy, people find ways to communicate through artistic work. The arts may not enjoy such organised visibility and prominent public platforms, but they carry on nonetheless. Looked through one lens, we might say that funding cuts will snatch arts institutions away from the public. But looked at another way we might conclude that they will push them closer to where the public and creative communities increasingly lie. This is tremendously exciting.

### *A New Social Contract for the Arts*

A New Social Contract for the Arts, is not just about a realignment of the arts with society, but involves the 'official arts community' embracing and enmeshing itself within new models of creative production and artistic activity, wherever they may lie. This is a daunting task, but fortunately the world is not short on experimental and innovative practice from which we can learn.

In terms of the development and creative use of space and real estate, I had the privilege of being involved in partnerships between the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and real estate developers for temporary use of vacant office space and store fronts for artist studios and projects. A decade later, almost 1,000 artists and hundreds of projects have been nurtured. Riwaq is an architectural preservation organisation I currently work with in Palestine. They have been instrumental in developing dozens of arts facilities by working with municipalities, communities and arts organisations to rehabilitate abandoned eighteenth and nineteenth century historic buildings. Zico house in Beirut and the Gowdown center in Nairobi are inspiring examples of shared, mixed-use facilities. The space in Beirut, aside from hosting studios, rehearsal space and a bar/performance venue, is also home to organisations working on equality, transparency and the environment. Gowdown is a factory space that is home to a cluster of arts and media organisations. Both have been instrumental as venues for gathering, collaboration and forging synergies during crisis moments. Teddy Cruz, an architect and theoretician, has been working with Casa Familiar on the border of Tijuana and San Diego on adaptive and sustainable development that can radically shape how community-based arts spaces are designed and resourced in developing contexts.

Artists themselves are imagining new roles in the resource ecology. I recently met with a group of artists in New Zealand that have launched their own successful wine label and I know of a successful artist-run removal firm in New York. Aside from remaining passive and hostages of limited support systems, artists are increasingly entrepreneurial and comfortable with crossing between activities and sectors to resource their creativity. Creative Capital in New York is an initiative set up by the Warhol Foundation and helps to build and support artists' entrepreneurial initiatives. The Institute for Arts Entrepreneurship in Chicago is helping artists to do just that. Wamda is a web-based platform designed to support emerging entrepreneurs in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia region with a special focus on the creative industries.

The web increasingly offers a variety of tools for networking, collaborating and funding creative projects. Crowd funding platforms like Kickstarter, RocketHub, Pledgemusic and Indiegogo are emerging globally to help artists execute projects and bring them to the marketplace. CrowdCulture in Sweden is a platform that combines public funding and citizen investors to support projects. Meetup.com, TEDx and Petcha Kucha enable creative communities to come together in different places and new ways to share and learn. PRX is innovating in the distribution of alternative independent music for broadcast and the marketplace.

There are non-virtual models for pooling and democratising access to resources: for example, the Arab Fund for Art and Culture is an independent grant making organisation in Beirut which supports dozens of regional projects and organisations each year. The India Foundation for the Arts is an independent organisation that makes grants to individuals and institutions with the aim of filling important gaps in private and public assistance for culture and the arts. Both generate their funds from a wide spectrum of donors and citizen contributions.

Expanded self-knowledge and confidence, forms of leadership and models for artistic creativity and support systems are linked goals. Each requires an act of imagination that makes the other more possible. We need the arts more than ever, to help us to imagine ways to live together in an impossibly connected and fragile world. As a sector, we must now strive to become the embodiment of the creativity and imagination that we hope to nurture.

*Moukhtar Kocache is an arts manager and curator. He currently works on the development and sustainability of arts and culture spaces, networks and infrastructure in the Middle East and North Africa region from the Ford Foundation's Cairo office. His grant making supports organisations and focuses on creativity, discourse and artistic development. His current interests include the sustainability of independent creative networks, culture and social philanthropy and film as a medium of self-representation.*

## **State of the Arts**

This essay will be published with the support from the [British Council](#) to coincide with the second annual [State of the Arts conference](#) on 10 February 2011, organised by the [RSA](#) and [Arts Council England](#). This brings together a wide range of creative voices to debate issues around resilience, audience and the value of arts and culture and seeks to explore some of the key questions facing the arts sector: in a time of austerity, what are the priorities now? What is our vision for the long term? What imaginative and practical approaches are needed to sustain the arts through this period? What new opportunities are there to deepen the value of the arts to individuals, to society and to the economy? The other provocations include:

### **Arts Funding, Austerity and the Big Society**

Remaking the case for the arts?

*John Knell and Matthew Taylor*

### **Rethinking Cultural Philanthropy**

Towards a More Sustainable Arts and Culture Sector

*Diane Ragsdale*

### **Collaborative arts**

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### **Looking Out...Looking In**

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